

Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

James M. Baker (1913-1919)



Recent Senate secretaries have encouraged development of career ladders in the offices under their supervision. Much earlier in this century, an assistant Senate librarian built his own career ladder. In a yet-to-be duplicated example of on-the-job advancement, Assistant Librarian James M. Baker convinced the majority party's caucus that he belonged on the top rung, thereby becoming the eleventh person to serve as secretary.

The election of 1912 returned control of the Senate to the Democratic party for the first time in eighteen years. On March 7, 1913, a jubilant caucus of Democratic senators convened to elect the secretary and other officers. Meeting just three days after Woodrow Wilson's presidential inauguration, the caucus faced a particularly touchy choice. Among the six candidates was Joseph R. Wilson, brother of the new president, Woodrow Wilson.

James M. Baker, assistant librarian and Democratic "caucus representative" for the past twenty years, seemed to be the frontrunner. The fifty-one-year-old South Carolina native enjoyed the support of influential Democrats, including his own state's senior senator, [Benjamin "Pitchfork Ben" Tillman](#), and President Pro Tempore [James P. Clarke](#) (Arkansas). Joseph Wilson's most active support came from the ranks of the Senate's freshmen and, not surprisingly, from President Wilson. According to novelist Gore Vidal, when his grandfather, Senator [Thomas Gore](#) (Oklahoma), refused the president's request to help engineer Wilson's selection, formerly warm relations between the men quickly chilled.

In a last-ditch effort to derail Baker's likely election and advance Wilson's chances, Tennessee Senator [Luke Lea](#) moved to delay the balloting until the following morning so that a five-member committee could examine charges that Baker had an improper financial relationship with a failed New York City cotton brokerage. A U.S. attorney had found that the firm, a decade earlier, had maintained a buying account in cotton futures for the well-connected Senate aide. Under this alleged arrangement, the firm covered investment losses, leaving Baker free to participate in any profits.

On March 8, 1913, the Democratic caucus summoned Baker to explain the matter. Following his presentation of legal documents and an ensuing hour of debate, the caucus awarded the post to Baker on the second ballot with twenty-five of forty-seven votes. He took office five days later.

James Marion Baker was born on August 18, 1861, in Lowndesville, South Carolina. He attended Wofford College in Spartanburg from 1879 to 1880, and then pursued legal training for two years in a New York City law office. After working with his grandfather on a railroad construction project, Baker turned to hometown banking and mercantile pursuits. When the Democrats took control of the Senate in 1893, Baker moved to Washington to become Democratic "caucus representative" and assistant Senate librarian. He continued in those posts after his party lost the Senate majority two years later. As assistant librarian, he compiled several guides to government publications. When Democratic senators needed research assistance, they naturally turned to Baker, who had developed a reputation as a knowledgeable and accommodating party aide.

Immediately after Baker's March 1913 election, a Democratic caucus committee reviewed the forty-nine staff positions within the secretary's office to ensure that patronage jobs were evenly divided among Democratic senators and that the Republicans in the minority had no greater patronage advantage than did the Democrats during their minority years. The caucus committee also reviewed the effectiveness of the individual employees to protect those "who by efficient experience, capacity, and diligence, expedite business to the credit of the Senate and the comfort and advantage of the individual Senators."

Exempted from this review were staff listed on the "Old Soldiers' Roll" (OSR). The OSR consisted of Union army veterans, many of whom were either disabled or otherwise beyond their productive years. Most OSR listees owed their appointments to Republican senators, whose party continued to trumpet its association with the Union's Civil War victory. In July 1911, Senate Republicans moved to protect the old soldiers against the increasing possibility of a Democratic takeover. To do this, they adopted a Senate resolution allowing all Union veterans on the Senate payroll to hold their positions until they voluntarily retired. When the Democrats took the reins in March 1913, they honored this provision, but noted that it offered no guarantee against salary reductions. The Secretary's office at that time included four OSR veterans – the principal clerk, the keeper of stationery, a document room clerk, and a clerk assigned to compile a history of revenue bills.

The Democratic caucus committee recommended that twenty of Secretary Baker's forty-nine employees be retained during good behavior. Among them were nine well-behaved Republicans. As a consequence of that party's eighteen-year period in the majority, these employees had risen to responsible positions. The protected Republicans included the financial clerk, the enrolling clerk, the document and printing clerks, the librarian, and the keeper of stationery. The remainder of the twenty were Democrats who, for the most part, served as assistants to these officeholders. The caucus committee identified nineteen additional positions, including those of the journal and executive clerks, for which

Secretary Baker, on the recommendation of individual senators, could either retain the incumbent or select a replacement. Finally, the committee identified seven positions to be abolished.

The 1913 efforts of Senate Democrats to balance the need for competent and experienced staff with the natural patronage demands of a political institution followed a tradition that Senate Republicans had maintained during their previous years in control. When the Republicans resumed the majority in 1919, they continued that tradition.

Secretary Baker held his job through six tumultuous years. During his tenure, the Senate enacted far-reaching economic legislation and addressed the growing requirement for American involvement in the First World War. It also strengthened its floor procedures, created the posts of party whips, and established the cloture rule.

After the election of a Republican successor in 1919, President Wilson appointed Baker deputy commissioner of internal revenue. Two years later, with the arrival of a Republican presidential administration, Baker left the government and established a Washington law firm. He remained active in the firm for ten years, retiring in 1931 to assist with Franklin Roosevelt's upcoming presidential campaign. As a reward for that assistance, Baker became U.S. minister to Siam (Thailand) in the Roosevelt administration. In 1937, ill health forced him to retire and return to his home town, where he died in 1940.